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ABSTRACT

Although there is a variety of approaches to teaching composition in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes, none is entirely satisfactory in helping undergraduate ESL students succeed in the academic and professional world. This population has specialized needs and objectives and requires a more tailored approach. The most common approaches currently used are free composition, controlled composition, semi-controlled composition, and neo-Aristotelian composition. The process of composing in each of these approaches is: (1) subordinated to the mechanical manipulation of models, (2) disregarded because students are not helped with invention or revision, or (3) limited by forcing students to write within restrictive outlines. Assignments using these approaches give little regard to the students' future needs. Based on research on the writing skill needs of ESL students, a course was designed using a modification of the British model of English for specific purposes. The course is individualized to the greatest extent possible, with assignments based on the students' academic majors and with support services such as tutors, a reading center, language labs, and student-teacher conferences used routinely. The focus on language skills rather than composition elements, on specific rather than general writing tasks, and on language skills improvement rather than pronunciation mastery has been found to be effective. (MSE)

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TEACHING ENGLISH FOR THE PROFESSIONS: ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN ESL UNDERGRADUATE COMPOSITION COURSES

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Abstract

This paper deals with the rationale for modifying existing general ESL composition courses with more specialized English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricular components. The limitations of the Free, Controlled, Semi-Controlled, and Neo-Aristotelian composition approaches are discussed, and modification to existing ESP curriculum design models is presented.

In both teaching and research I have investigated various approaches to teaching non-native students to communicate in English more clearly and effectively. Like most ESL (English as a Second Language) composition teachers, however, I have never been entirely satisfied with the effectiveness of any of these proposed approaches in terms of how they can help my undergraduate ESL students succeed in the academic and professional world.

These students fall into two categories: those who attend a university in the United States of America to gain the academic skills necessary to aid their native countries after graduation, and those who want to gain the necessary academic skills to take their place in the American workforce after graduation. My intuition told me that the most commonly used ESL composition approaches were inadequate in helping these students succeed in their academic and future careers, and I felt that a modified English for Specific Purposes approach would be more helpful to these students in this linguistically-specialized environment.

Consistently over the past twenty years there have been four general ESL composition approaches used at various levels of student proficiency, and sometimes in combination, in American universities. They are the Free, the Controlled, the Semi-Controlled, and the Neo-Aristotelian composition approaches. However, many TESOL teachers and researchers are beginning to call for a more pragmatic approach to teaching writing, and other communication skills, in order to more effectively prepare our ESL students for their academic and professional careers. This paper discusses this call for change and offers an example of a new, more pragmatic, course.

The Free Composition Approach

Erazmus has described the Free composition approach as a "program of fluency that pushes and motivates the students to produce extensively with little regard to the number and types of errors and infelicities" (27). This approach calls for the students to write quickly with little or no time scheduled for revision and editing because as Erazmus notes, "it is more important to have the student produce large quantities of materials than to produce perfect copy" (28). He further clarifies the theory underlying this approach by stating that

> Every new use by a student of a vocabulary item, a variation in syntactic sequence, or a different structural combination is an enrichment of his language control of a new range of morphemes and their distribution. This is worth the errors that he makes. The next time he goes over similar territory he will do do so with greater security and ease with fewer mistakes. (29)

In general, the Free composition approach entails producing a great deal of writing on the student's part, and a great deal of

correction on the teacher's. Note Smalley and Hank's Free writing exercise:

> When you first came to the United States, were you surprised by anything? Can you think of examples? Did you find anything particularly difficult to adjust to? Can you think of examples? Choose one of these topics and support it with examples.

One can see that when students are asked to write in this approach, there is no mention of audience needs and little revision time given to the assignment. Thus, when this is the only approach being used in the ESL classroom, the writing process is not being taught effectively. Furthermore, the production of large quantities of rapid unrevised writing was attacked from the outset of its introduction. Dressel et al. and Hunting were among the many researchers to realize that student writers would not learn to write merely by writing and that frequent writing without instruction might even be detrimental.

The Controlled Composition Approach

Pincas has described the Controlled composition approach as ideal "because it conforms to the expressed ideals of scientific habit-forming teaching methods which strive to prevent error from occurring" (186). In this approach the ESL students are "controlled" in that they can create no new ideas while writing. Instead, the students are only given the opportunity to make exact copies of, or construct simple to multiple substitutions on, pieces of English discourse. Usually the "control" in this approach is complete in that even the substitutions have already been selected for the students. Spencer provides a good example of the pre-selected substitutions when he asks ESL students to modify the given text by using one word from each list below it:

> A (1) man (2) walked (3) down the street. A (4) girl (5) was waiting for him outside a (6) shop. As he approached her, she smiled (7) and said, "Hello. How are you?"
>
> (1) tall, young, well-dressed
> (2) with a beard, in a black hat, with sun glasses
> (3) rapidly, hurriedly, impatiently
> (4) pretty, fair-haired, dark skinned
> (5) in high-heeled shoes, with an umbrella, in a hat
> (6) Chemist's, grocer's, bicycle
> (7) pleasantly, attractively, in a friendly manner
>
> (158)

The Semi-Controlled Composition Approach

The Semi-Controlled composition approach in American universities can be divided into two different types of control: grammatically-based control and topic-based control.

In the grammatically-based Semi-Controlled approach the ESL students may be asked to make grammatical changes such as gender, tense, or voice of the verbs to a piece of discourse. In this approach the students are taught a particular grammatical form and, in order to reinforce the learning of this form, they must write or revise various sentences in a discourse using this form. Robinson gives a good example of this grammatically-based Semi-Controlled approach:

> DIRECTIONS: Change the following paragraphs of questions into paragraphs of statements. Note that the progressive present tense in this exercise expresses action taking place wholly in the future. As you write, substitute some ideas of your own for those in the exercise, but stay in the progressive present tense for the sake of concentrated practice.
>
> (Guided 75)

This approach differs from the Controlled approach in that new ideas can be introduced into the discourse by the students when modifying the initial piece. The theory behind the

grammatically-based approach is that students will have a solid understanding of the grammatical form once they have used it in a variety of ways in any given written discourse. It also emphasizes the importance of grammatical form in writing and in the context of discourse.

In the topic-based Semi-Controlled approach to ESL composition, the students are given more freedom than in the other approaches. In this approach, ESL students are given either a combination of pictorial control and a written model, or semi-controlled exercises where content and ideas are suggested. The students are allowed to create their own discourse by following models or answering questions given to them. However, they do not receive instruction explaining rhetorical patterns or any other aspect of the writing process. Ross and Doty provide a good example of a topic-based Semi-Controlled writing assignment:

> Model Passage: To know a person's language is to understand his culture, for language grows out of and and reflects culture. The Tzeltal tribe in Mexico, for instance, has twenty-five different words for expressing the idea 'to carry.' Tzeltal speakers can indicate by one word each of these concepts: carrying on the shoulder, carrying on the head, carrying in the palm of the hand, or carrying in a container.
> Writing Assignment: Following the model in the preceding exercise, write a composition in which you show how knowing your native language helps a person understand your culture. (144)

The Controlled and Semi-Controlled approaches have one unifying principle. According to Raimes, the degree of control used in the classroom is subservient to the belief that "the use of language is the manipulation of fixed patterns which are learned by imitation, and not until these have been learned can originality occur in their manipulation or variation" (390).

While these approaches may help the beginning to intermediate ESL proficiency levels understand basic grammatical and stylistic considerations, I view them as ineffectively preparing the students for future academic and career writing tasks. Simply stated, in the Controlled and Semi-Controlled approaches not enough time is spent discussing and experimenting with actual student writing.

The Neo-Aristotelian Composition Approach

The Neo-Aristotelian approach is probably the most popular approach in American universities used to teach writing skills to intermediate to advanced ESL proficiency levels. Adapted from traditional native student composition classes, Aristotle's 28 topoi for inventing enthymemes are molded into what native composition teachers call the eight patterns of development. Thus, most ESL composition textbooks are written to help students write the following essays: description, narration, process, definition, classification and analysis, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and argumentation and persuasion.

When this approach is used in the ESL composition class, students are often told to follow paradigmatic outlines that result in five paragraph essays. The students' essays, no matter what pattern of development is in use, are generally completed with one introductory paragraph, three main paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. D'Angelo shows the analysis paradigmatic outline to look like this:

1 Introduction (state thesis)
2 Characteristic 1
3 Characteristic 2
4 Characteristic 3, 4, 5
5 Conclusion (69)

However, while this approach allows for more of the ESL student's own writing than in the other generally used approaches, it has still come under attack. Sommers notes that:

> How very important is the relation between discovering a structure and discovering a meaning. . . .Yet we rob our students of this very important part of this discovery process, . . .by forcing them to write formulaic five paragraph essays. . . .A fixed structure often inhibits the discovery of ideas and therefore, the process of significant revision. . . .It must be remembered that there are numerous forms of writing to teach our students besides the formulaic essay. (48-9)

Consequently, I view the Free, Controlled, Semi-Controlled, and the Neo-Aristotelian approaches to ESL writing as ineffective second language techniques in preparing undergraduate non-native students to communicate in their academic and future career choices. Simply stated, the process of composing in these approaches is subordinated to the mechanical manipulation of models, disregarded by not helping the students with invention or revision of their writing, or limited by forcing the students to write within restrictive outlines. When assignments are made in these approaches, there is little thought given to the future needs of the students.

Towards Teaching English for the Professions

Canale and Swain began to stress a functionally-based communicative approach as opposed to the grammar-based approaches previously proposed for ESL composition. Currently, other ESL researchers are attempting to clarify these functional writing demands by focusing on students' communicative needs. Kroll, and

Ostler, both at the university of Southern California, researched the writing needs and demands of non-native students in American universities. Kroll's research indicates that students need writing classes that would give them practice in writing skills that they would use in the future. Ostler's research indicates that many of the writing skills that non-native students need practice in are subject-specific. Johns, at San Diego State University, discovered that in ESL composition classes all four language skills are important and that ESP classes are particularly preferred by the Engineering faculty at her university.

Pearson claims that many ESL students entering university have trouble achieving communicative competence in the four language skills because many of the concepts that underlie these competencies are culture-bound. Thus this researcher notes that the four language skills should be taught together when necessary at the earliest university level to help these students meet their forthcoming communication needs. Pearson recommends teaching the "academically important concepts such as paraphrasing, summarizing, general to specific modes, and relevant to irrelevant sorting techniques to university ESL undergraduates by using real-world functionally communicative discourse" (420). Blenton warns that ESL students taught only through personalized narrative-based writing syllabi may not be capable of surviving in an academic world where impersonal formal exposition is required. Finally, Carpenter and Hunter recommend functional writing courses as the best way to improve writing, and thus, communicative competence for the ESL student in the

academic setting. I saw this new undergraduate approach as a modification of the British idea of English for Specific Purposes; a type of individualized undergraduate ESL Writing Across the Curriculum Approach.

Designing a Modified English for Specific Purposes Course

Like most curriculum design projects, my ESP course evolved after I had spent much time reviewing the existing, but in my view, inadequate theoretical design models. These models, all designed for the British higher educational system, were of particular interest because of their combination of both occupational and educational English purposes as the basis for an ESP course. Strevens (see Appendix A) divided all special purpose language teaching courses into their occupational or educational contexts ("Special Purpose" 101). He developed further distinctions between these two contexts by differentiating among the various experimental student levels possible in any course. Also the British Ministry of Overseas Development issued their own theoretical design model(see Appendix B), from which I noted a further division in English for Educational Purposes (EEP). This latter model divided EEP into English for study in a specific discipline and English as a school subject. Even more confusion resulted from the British Ministry's attempt to add a third acronym - -EST or English for Science and Technology, since no-one was, and I would argue still is, completely clear whether EST was solely for an occupational or an educational purpose.

Disadvantages to the Application of Existing Models

Strevens' model included both the occupational and educational post-experience and post-study statuses, but since students in this country would probably not enroll in a course for specific purposes if they had already finished the specific field of study or work, modifications were needed. Also, in the British ministry's model only the experienced/studied and the presently occupied/studying groups of students closely represented the status of non-native students at the American undergraduate level. Furthermore, these British models focused too much on the different forms of ESP. Modifications were needed to define ESP in the American undergraduate context as a combination of academic study skills, science and technology training where necessary, and future communicative and career readiness. Conversely, the previous British models diffused all these purposes into different and varied curricula.

Thus, any modifications I made on these previous models had to neatly combine EAP, EOP, and EST in building a unified approach to total communication for academic and career situations. These modifications had to clarify the steps a beginning ESP curriculum designer should follow in developing such a course. The most effective curriculum design process I had studied was that developed by Davis and Borgan, who presented four stages to curriculum design - -Identification, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation - -and it was through these stages that I developed my own curriculum design model (see Appendix C), and my own modified ESP course.

Course Description

Pre-teaching design involved the identification of student needs, faculty desires, and institutional constraints. In addition, cross curricular connections, room, time, and space scheduling, and realistic teaching materials had to be developed at this pre-teaching stage. The actual teaching was conducted during the implementation stage, and the student, faculty, and support staff evaluations were conducted during the last stage of the design model.

The course is individualized as much as possible, and therefore, it is quite time-consuming. Writing assignments are individualized in that Business majors are taught the writing skills and tasks their professors expect them to be competent in, while Science and Engineering students are taught different writing skills and tasks. These skills and tasks are discovered through faculty surveys, and recently published writing across the curriculum research findings.

In addition, support services are utilized. Each student is assigned a discipline specific tutor in the writing center to help with specific writing difficulties. The students also are given tutoring in the Reading center, and the texts used with these students are discipline specific. Also, the language lab is used to teach listening comprehension. Finally, each student is required to have one twenty minute conference with the writing instructor each week to discuss what he/she is writing and one twenty minute conference with his/her discipline-specific advisor.

While the class is individualized as much as possible, each student is taught the following key academic skills:

* Writing Tasks which are directly related to their majors
* Research skills that will help them work more effectively later
* Documentation skills in their discipline's style sheet
* Note-taking, paraphrasing, and comprehension reading skills
* Oral presentation skills

In terms of success, through the use of follow-up surveys, I have discovered that the students and faculty involved have found the course to help ESL students advance in their majors and careers. My initial intuitions about the need for such a modified approach have lead me to design a course which focused on skills rather than elements, specific academic and professional writing tasks rather than general writing tasks, and listening, speaking, and reading skills improvement rather than the mastery of native-like pronunication. The course met the individual student's present and future needs and did not try to meet perceived group needs, often perceived before the students have entered the class let alone completed any writing. The course focused on real-world writing and not the usual required writing for a teacher or examiner. Finally, the course encouraged both student and teacher motivation through the realization of the students' goals.

The rationale for using this modified ESP approach over other general ESL approaches is that the current research points to the need for such a development in our field. In reviewing the literature concerning ESL approaches, and in acting on the responses gained from the faculty questionnaire, this course has been modified to meet the advanced ESL students' needs more effectively. Therefore, the modified ESP approach focuses on the

specific skills these students will need to survive academically and professionally. All four language skills are taught as needed; no imitation, controlled, semi-controlled, or free approaches are used. Assignments and weekly tutorial sessions are individualized, and the academic and community resources are used to their maximum effectiveness by the students who can consult well-qualified support staff.

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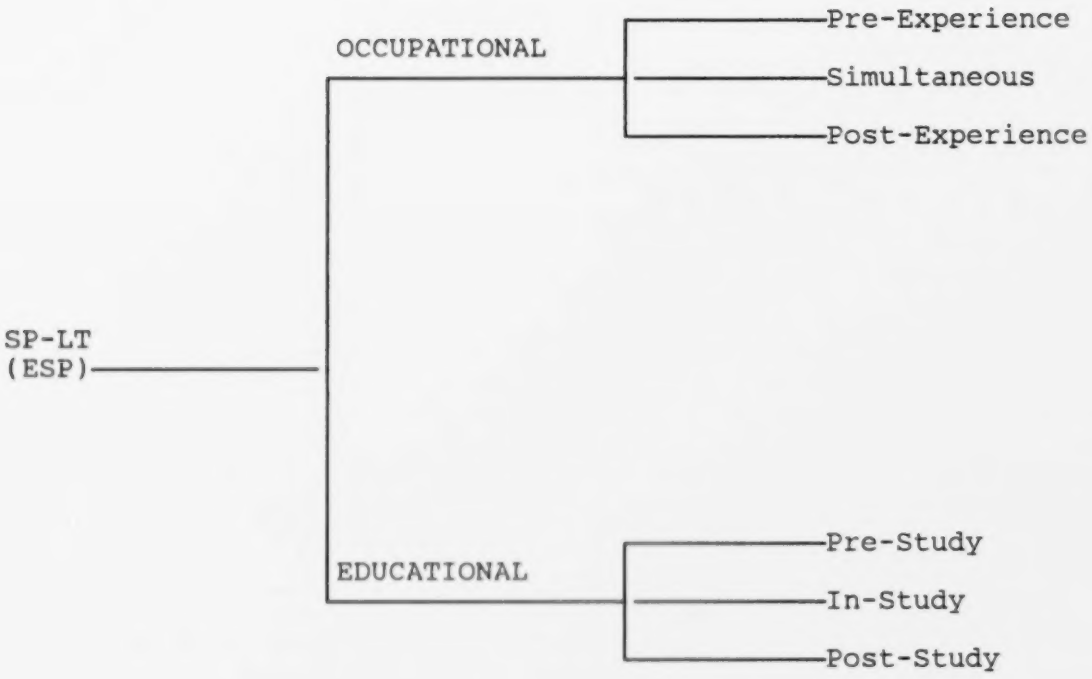
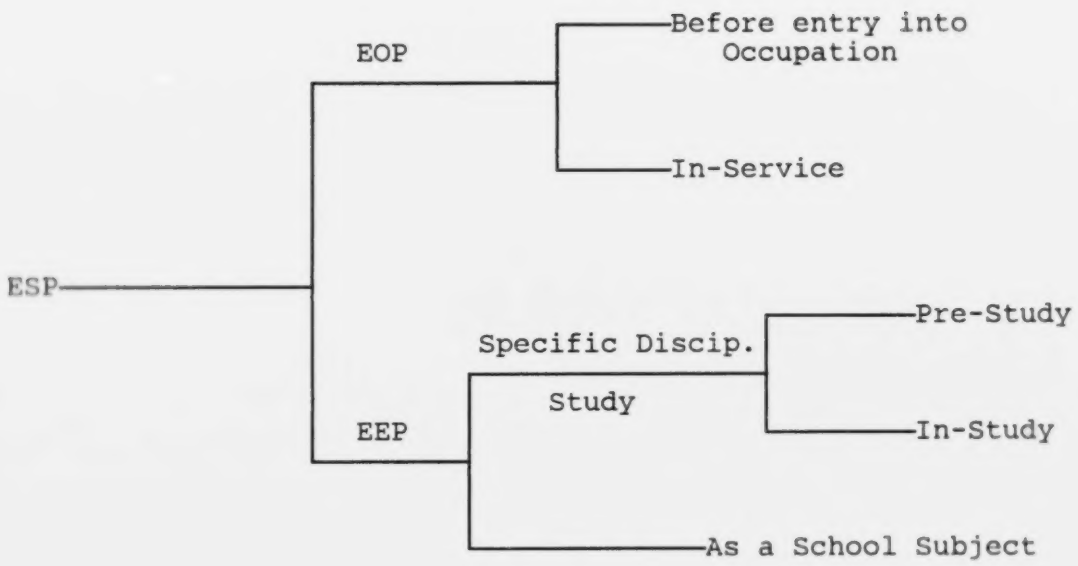
APPENDIX A: STREVENS' ESP CURRICULUM DESIGN MODEL



APPENDIX B: BRITISH MINISTRY'S ESP CURRICULUM DESIGN MODEL



APPENDIX C: WALLACE'S MODIFIED ESP CURRICULUM DESIGN MODEL